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AUTHOR Arnold, Richard D.
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ABSTRACT

Criteria applicable to all reading programs (and particularly to reading programs for Mexican-American children), regardless of philosophical or methodological differences among the various programs, are delineated. These criteria are listed and discussed in the form of the following nine questions: Has a good learning environment been established? Is appropriate and worthwhile content used? Are the readiness activities related to the reading materials? Is adequate expressive language participation provided? Is the program sequentially organized to provide for continuous growth? Is provision made for individual differences within the reading program? Is extensive training in areas of weaknesses available? Does the reading program provide for systematic evaluation of the child as well as the program itself? Are children assured successful reading experiences? It is suggested that if educators can affirmatively answer the questions posed, their reading program will very likely be an effective and successful one. (Author/CM)

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Richard D. Arnold
Purdue University

Room 107
Education Building
Purdue University
Lafayette, Indiana 47907

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Reading Instruction and
the Mexican-American

"COMPONENTS OF A READING PROGRAM FOR THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN CHILD"

I would like to discuss with you the components or parts of a reading program for Mexican-American children. There are many ingredients in a good reading program - too many to identify here. However, a few parts are probably important in any reading program for any child, and are vital - at least in my thinking - for Mexican-American children learning to read. I shall attempt to point out what seems to be meritorious parts in all reading programs for Mexican-American children regardless of philosophical or methodological differences among the various programs.

The following nine points which are phrased in question form are offered for your consideration. If you are working on a reading program for Mexican-American children, can you answer these questions with a "yes"? If not, I hope you will examine them.

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1. Has a good learning environment been established?

This question is directed primarily to teachers. It is the teacher who shoulders the responsibility for providing an atmosphere conducive to learning. What seems to be essential is teacher sensitivity to others. Sensitivity can be described to include the notion of a teacher who demonstrates acceptance. Needed is a teacher who can accept children regardless of their background, their culture, their language, their social class or whatever other dimension of life you wish to mention. In short, these children need a sensitive teacher willing to accept them as they are.

Teachers, by the very nature of their jobs, are placed in a position that has traditionally defined the teacher's role as the one who "makes children grow". The idea of "getting"or "making" them grow implies standards of achievement. Thus the teacher faces the apparent dilemma of working hard to teach the children while at the same time he tries to be accepting. To be an accepting and achievement oriented teacher does not necessarily mean incompatable roles. The important point is for the teacher to distinguish the difference between a behavior and a person. The teacher can tell a child that a particular reading behavior was not attained while at the same time conveying to the child that the behavior is in no way related to his individual worth. Children expect and can tolerate failing at tasks as long as they do not perceive the task as an integral part of their personality. To fail at a task is tolerable; to fail as a person is not.

Teachers often find themselves working with children from backgrounds different from their own; hence it becomes necessary for teachers to learn about the cultural and social class differences that may exist between the teacher and the child. Teachers of Mexican-American children must know the background of their students. Such awareness of their background can be learned from textbooks but it becomes truly meaningful when learned in the real world. Interacting with parents in the community and learning their values, their life styles, their pleasures and their problems will provide insight into the lives of Mexican-American families. From such knowledge will come empathy for the children and a far deeper knowledge of their personal needs in the classroom. Such knowledge and understanding should result in improved classroom climate--a climate where individuals are accepted as worthwhile human beings who can and do learn. To be sure, at times certain reading behaviors are still not obtained and will need to be worked on so that the child can achieve in both school and society.

2. Is appropriate and worthwhile content used?

Regardless of methodology it seems important that children read about something that falls within their experiencial repetoire. That is, they must bring a background of experience to the printed page which, when read, will be something they can relate to and understand. That doesnot mean children must personally have experienced everything they read about, but they must at least have a cognitive referent of some type or the author's message becomes irrelevant.

Children understand best what they have seen, felt, or heard about.

It is not at all clear what Mexican-American children will most profit from in reading content. It does seem important that they learn to read about their culture and heritage, but it seems equally important that they be exposed to the body of knowledge expected to be learned by all children in our pluralistic, technological society. Reading in the content areas plays an extremely important role in the development of children especially after they have learned the fundamental skills of reading.

In the primary grades the content also should be relevant and within the experiential background of the youngsters. However, reading content should be considered basically in terms of teaching reading skills. It is in the early school years that the children learn to break the code, to analyze new words, and to develop basic comprehension skills. The content of the story is worthwhile if it can be used as a vehicle to provide children opportunity to practice solving reading problems similar to those taught during the instructional period. In readers or books the newly learned skills are reinforced and habituated. Hopefully authors can make the materials appropriate, relevant and worthwhile; but first and foremost the materials must be designed to reinforce instruction. Relevant reading can be done outside of the reading period, but practice reading must be done under supervision during the reading period.

3. Are the readiness activities related to the reading materials?

Readiness is defined in a broad sense to include the notion that

every lesson has a short period of time preceding it in which the teacher and children can talk, questions can be asked, and judgments can be made concerning whether each child is ready to enter the new lesson. The teacher needs to know if the children can relate, respond and react to the content of the story. A discussion using similar content can give the teacher the opportunity to determine if the children can handle the concepts covered in the story. The discussion will also provide an opportunity for the assessment of language development relevant to the concepts being presented. Thus, if the teacher can decide that the children have the experiential, conceptual and language background prerequisite for learning the lesson, he can then procede with instruction. If the students have not attained the prerequisites, then a readiness lesson will be more appropriate and probably more beneficial for a good learning experience. During the readiness period of the lesson the teacher has three important judgments to make. Do the children have the experience, the concepts and the oral language needed for the lesson?

4. Is adequate expressive language participation provided?

Since Mexican-American children often have been found to be lacking in English language proficiency, particularly upon entrance to school, practice in second language learning appears to be an essential component of the reading and broader language arts program. The language participation program can be viewed as a special case of readiness work if so desired, but it is so important to success in school achievement that it deserves special con-

sideration.

Most Mexican-American children learn to understand English relatively easily. Yet frequently it is found that their ability in expressive English is quite low relative to their receptive English. In other words they understand English better than they speak it. This imbalance argues strongly for the need to develop skills in the use of English. The development of expressive English cannot be left to chance. To believe that children will be provided opportunity to use English through informal discussion and without a structured language period appears at least imprudent if not unwise. The language program should be carefully designed to provide an expressive language base which will prepare the children to deal with school content in their second language. The relevance to reading is obvious.

Regardless of the actual content of a special language program, two very important dimensions of language are viewed as essential in the practice period. The study and practice of sounds in the language have long been recognized as essential if better spoken English is to be achieved. Certainly, if the objective of the teaching program is a socially unmarked dialect, one would place "sounds-oriented" exercises high on the priority list. The relationship of such an oral language program to phonics or decoding is easy to recognize.

The second part of an expressive language program, and equally as important as the phonological dimension, is the study and practice of language structures. The emphasis of this dimension should be

on meaning, or understanding what is to be and what has been communicated. Children should learn how to manipulate words in utterances and how to take a basic idea and transform, elaborate and express the thought in similar ways. The major objective would be to get children to talk in larger units; to get them to move away from monosyllabic, one word responses. The relationship of reading comprehension to language structures is apparent.

Of course, other dimensions of language can be taught in a practice period just described. The point is that a good program should contain a balance between the development of phonology and the larger language elements in English. Without emphasis on both dimensions, the program will most likely be inadequate for many Mexican-American children learning English as their second language.

5. <u>Is the program sequentially organized to provide for continuous growth</u>?

Most educators believe that reading should be taught in an organized fashion and the material should be developmentally oriented proceding from simple to complex. If we agree that many Mexican-American children have difficulty with reading because of a more fundamental language-based problem, then we must again focus on the language the children are learning as well as the usual reading sequence. A teacher of middle class children from homes where English is the language spoken does not have to focus so strongly on language development because the children come to school with reasonably good command of the language of instruction.

With non-native English speakers it becomes extremely important that the teacher determine the extent to which the children can work with the new vocabulary presented. But perhaps equally or even more important is whether or not the child can work with new or modified language structures. As of now we really are not in a good position to know what structures to teach and in what sequence they should be taught. Research in the area of second language learning is vitally needed. It will help immensely in establishing a developmental sequence of English vocabulary and syntax as well as in determining naturalistic language structures the children can work with easily. Then the oral language sequence can be carefully correlated with the sequence of skills being taught in reading.

6. Is provision made for individual differences within the reading program?

Educators today almost universally acknowledge the concept of individual differences, but frequently the concept is not fully realized. Perhaps it is because people do not know how to assess individual differences. Evaluation and diagnostic teaching are of paramount importance if each child is to be given an opportunity to learn at his developmental rate. Behavioral psychologists have contributed much that can be applied to reading. They have pointed out the need to establish behavioral objectives which are easily assessed by the teacher. If observable reading behaviors are set as objectives, evaluation is much easier. Diagnosis based on ob-

servable behaviors can naturally lead to prescriptive teaching of individuals.

Assessment of individual attainment based on observation of specific behaviors can, of course, be accomplished through testing and other formalized evaluation methods. However, informal assessment by teachers is also needed. I would suggest that the informal assessment of specific behaviors can be accomplished in the readiness period preceding the lesson. It is then the teachers can make judgments as to whether or not the children have attained the prerequisite behaviors needed for the next lesson. If the behaviors were not attained, then provision for additional reteaching must be made.

7. Is extensive training in areas of weaknesses available?

When a teacher discovers a child has a weakness, a plan of corrective action needs to be implemented. To acknowledge that a child has a weakness and not to teach to remove the weakness can be a self-defeating situation that makes both the child and his teacher frustrated and unhappy. Thus, schools have the enormous task of providing adequate corrective work for each child.

The types of remedial activities will be numerous, for children can have so many different problems. They may be directly relate d to reading or they may be reading-related problems, all of which must be dealt with if successful reading achievement is the goal for all children. Not only will there have to be special reading exercises and programs but also language, perceptual,motor,and cognitive skills

programs devised to handle the myriad problems teachers encounter.

A good remedial program calls for a highly individualized program of corrective work in the classroom in conjunction with special remedial programs provided by the school through ancillary special service personnel such as para-professionals, remedial teachers and school psychologists. The task of providing for extensive remedial work is expensive and very demanding. But if Mexican-American children have the right to read, then we must face this problem squarely and find ways to provide for corrective work.

8. <u>Does the reading program provide for systematic evaluation of the child as well as the program itself?</u>

The importance of informal assessment by the classroom teacher has been mentioned. Unfortunately, with the particular problems that Mexican-American children have, the bulk of standardized tests available are rendered nearly useless. Even basic content validity of many achievement tests is subject to serious question. The implication is quite clear: objective measures of growth and achievement are badly needed for Mexican-American children. Teachers need to know if the children have learned what has been presented in the lessons. If an experimental method is used, the need is even more pressing. Not only pupil progress but also program effectiveness needs to be evaluated. The value of an experimental reading program is highly questionable unless some sort of objective measures can be used to evaluate effectiveness. Thus, it is necessary for program developers not only to build new curriculum materials but also to

find ways to measure pupil attainment.

If behavioral objectives have been set, it is much easier to design tests to measure the objectives. The concept of mastery tests has a good deal to offer those who work in the field of reading. Children are not measured against one another but are tested to see if they have or have not learned the lessons. In experimental situations groups of children are assessed to see if they have or have not learned the reading behaviors identified as critical for continued success in reading.

9. Are children assured successful reading experiences?

The final point I would like to make today has to do with happy experiences. We know that when a person has a happy or a successful experience in any endeavor he undertakes, he will enjoy and be predisposed to return to that endeavor. That holds true for reading too. Sometimes we try so hard to get children to learn that the learning task becomes frustrating and unpleasant. Children tune the teacher out and are turned off. No matter how good the reading program is, how conscientious, dedicated and hard-working the teacher may be, if "tune out-turn off" occurs the children and the reading program as well are likely to fail.

A good reading period is viewed as having enough flexibility to include opportunities for children to work on tasks that they are ready to learn. Insuring successful reading experiences, insofar as is humanly possible, will predispose the children to want to repeat reading period and ultimately will lead to proficient reading

and enjoyment of the reading act. This then is a plea to make reading a happy experience for boys and girls. It is especially important for Mexican-American children who in many cases have had more than their share of unhappy experiences.

The nine components which I have identified appear to me to be fundamental for an effective reading program. If educators can answer "yes" to the nine questions posed, it seems that their reading program stands a good chance of being an effective and successful one--one that will have the major components needed for a reading program for Mexican-American children.